






Teaching history beyond borders

Contextualizing international history teacher training focusing on heritage, moral aspects, inclusion and emotion networking

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Abstract

This article explores the development and outcomes of an international history teacher training course initiated by researchers from Germany, The Netherlands, and Sweden. The course, part of the European University consortium *EUniWell*, aims to enhance teacher students' international experiences and knowledge by facilitating encounters between students from European countries. The course focuses on heritage as a central theme, theoretically framed by moral aspects, inclusion, and emotion networking in heritage and citizenship education. Through online seminars and one on-site week, held in Cologne, students engaged in international groups, visited heritage sites, and developed teaching materials. The course emphasized the importance of multiperspectivity, critical thinking, and cultural reflection in history education. Evaluations revealed positive student experiences, highlighting the value of international collaboration and the impact of heritage on learning. The findings suggest that integrating moral perspectives and inclusive practices in history education can foster democratic citizenship and enhance educational outcomes.

Keywords

History teaching, heritage, moral perspectives, inclusion, emotion networking

1 Introduction

History teaching is mainly a national issue and there are certain differences between countries. Besides, history teaching has often been used for fostering students in nationalistic ways, which is still the case in some countries (e.g. Bellatalla et al. 2022; Hutchins 2016; Jaskułowski et al. 2018;). In spite of different traditions and different school systems, European countries are parts

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of a European heritage and share in many ways common values and identity. When it comes to higher education, the European Union's ambitions of collaboration between countries have been raised during the last 20 years in terms of the Bologna process and the European Higher Education Area.

However, internationalization is not prominent in teacher education because of national differences and teacher students seldom encounter or experience other school systems or teaching practices outside their own countries. To increase teacher students' international experiences and knowledge, three History didactics researchers from Germany, The Netherlands and Sweden met in 2022 and decided to establish a joint course with the purpose to facilitate encounters between teacher students from European countries in order to increase knowledge about teaching challenges and each other's school systems. The course was developed within the context of the European University Initiative consortium EUniWell, *European University for Wellbeing*. In the EUniWell consortium teacher education is a prioritized arena.

The main theme for the course and the collaboration was chosen against the backdrop of the challenges and threats in present time. In several European countries there are tensions related to migration, (failed) integration, extremist political movements and a distrust in institutions and democracy. The societal "contract" seems to be questioned. Accordingly, a theme with potential to stimulate engagement and discussions about the past and relations to the present could be a way to develop teaching about narratives and objects, relevant for Europeans. The topic Heritage was chosen as the theme of the course. By exploring national and European heritage, common and varying narratives and different interpretations can be discussed (Logtenberg et al. 2024). Heritage could also help understanding identity and perceptions in other countries as one way to make meaning in teaching and learning.

In this miniature, we present and discuss the theoretical frameworks of the international course. The focus is on moral aspects, inclusion, and emotion networking as educational practices in heritage and citizenship education. We will also report on learning outcomes and students' reflections on international collaboration when exploring history education through heritage.

2 Week in Cologne

So far, the seminars have been held twice in Cologne with students from Germany, The Netherlands, France, Italy, Spain, Sweden and Ukraine. In order to make the internationality a reality, groups were formed in online sessions before the actual meetings, with the aim of creating groups that were as heterogeneous as possible. This applied to both nationality and level of experience. A special feature of the work was that students in the early stages of their studies took part in the course alongside those who already had teaching experience and were pursuing postgraduate studies. It was therefore a 'novice-expert setting' in which not only the intercultural perspective was taken into account, but also the perspectives of the other group members and their needs at their respective levels of experience. The joint work was characterised by working together on a cultural phenomenon of remembrance and developing tasks that would work in all countries. The aim was for international and diverse groups of student teachers to design lessons or learning tasks that incorporated international heritage, fostered historical reasoning around moral issues, and promoted the inclusion of all learners. In particular, questions of a 'common and shared heritage' were taken up and reflected upon where specific regional conditions were discussed. In addition to the classic seminar work, local heritage sites were visited, such as the NS Documentation Centre in Cologne, a former Gestapo prison that is now a memorial and cultural institution, or monuments linked to 'dark histories' such as the Monument of the Grey Busses (van der Heide & Wilkening 2025). The programme also included a day trip to Amsterdam, where the Maritime Museum was examined from a post-colonial perspective, focusing on power structures in European societies.

3 Moral perspectives

Heritage sites and narratives are often manifestations of special occasions, agents, activities or memories with a focus on success or tragedies – what was considered good or bad, and what could still be considered good or bad. The narratives or expressions of heritage make meaning

to people, in different ways (Colby, 2008; Foster and Yeager, 1998; Löfström, 2014). Encounters with heritage provide possibilities for reflections, and also to feel related to something or to distance from it (Grever et al. 2012). People are fascinated by difficult or contested pasts with moral aspects involved. This is perceived as meaning-making and relevant, because it touches upon and challenges human perceptions and interpretations (Ammert et al. 2020). It is important to underline that moral perspectives do not mean to moralize or to judge people or societies in the past from a present point of view, it means to reflect on what message the heritage sends and how it could be interpreted. Moral perspectives can facilitate encounters with another time and with different ways of treating people (Ammert et al. 2022). Heritage as traditions, rules of conduct, concepts and experiences are mediated and made comprehensible in encounters between temporal dimensions, the past, the present and perspectives on the future (Rüsen, 2004). Milligan et al. (2018, p. 470) argue that “for example, when students assess historical actions, when they seek to understand others’ perspectives, or when they consider how best to move forward from the past, they move into the practice of ethics”. Situations when moral values or acceptable conduct have been challenged or violated, increase interest in the past and provide opportunities for interconnections between time layers. Teachers must be prepared and have skills to organize teaching and to help pupils perceive and interpret moral reflections and reactions in relation to heritage.

4 Inclusion perspectives

Another central focus laid on reflecting upon and developing inclusive educational settings. Again, an international perspective was extremely important, as there are big differences in the implementation of inclusion across Europe. In some countries, there is still an exclusionary school system, such as in Germany, where a narrow understanding of inclusion—namely the issue of integrating children and young people with disabilities into schools—remains the primary focus. Meanwhile, in many other countries an inclusive school system has already been widely implemented and the focus is rather on questions of a broad understanding of inclusion. Representative for such broad approaches are general questions about the development of offers for the diverging needs of all students (Haug, 2016; Schwab, 2020). The teaching materials developed in the course were also considered in the light of this broad understanding of inclusion, which addressed diversity in general. With a particular focus on heritage education, inclusion also means countering the international increase in social polarisation and the spread of exclusionary ideologies. In this respect, there is indeed a didactic gap. There have long been calls for heritage education to expand educational offers for children and young people — both in and out of school, with and without special needs — while considering their full range of skills and capabilities. However, little is known about the effectiveness of such inclusive actions. Particularly in the context of a heterogeneous society and inclusive demands, the question of how heritage institutions can make their offerings accessible to a broad public is also of great importance, as it is unclear whether all groups are always reached. The materials available to date are therefore often in a testing phase (Barsch & Nitschke, 2023). Nevertheless, inclusive thinking was at the heart of the seminar’s work. How can access to cultural heritage be designed so that all students, with their individual abilities and skills, can benefit from it? What scaffolding and universal design of learning measures are needed? A particular challenge of these approaches was to think not only about common differentiation measures on different levels, but also more fundamentally about how to design shared learning environments in inclusive settings (Smets, 2024; Steinbock & Dibbits, 2023; Barsch, Rein & Wilkening, 2025).

5 Emotion networking as an educational practice in heritage and citizenship education

Besides other learning activities such as discussions and lesson design, we applied the educational practice of emotion networking. When being confronted with sensitive or contested heritage like monuments, 'places of memory', objects, or symbols, this practice offers the possibility to create an inclusive learning space and to share both emotions and knowledge about heritage in a structured and protocolled way.

Emotion networking was developed around 2020 by Hester Dibbits of the Amsterdam Reinwardt Academy and Marlous Willemsen of the Amsterdam Institute ImagineIC (Dibbits, 2023). It was inspired by network approaches like the Actor Network Theory (ANT) in which agency is attributed to both human and non-human objects like heritage in our case, and the approach of Ulf Hannerz in his book *Exploring the City: Inquiries Toward an Urban Anthropology* (1983). The grid of the emotion network was created after the example of the 'Circumplex Model of Affect' by the American psychologist James Russell (1980).

Emotion networking as an educational practice shows the complexity of different individual emotions and prevents the sometimes persistent bipolarity of collective emotional stances towards the heritage object or cultural use of a symbol. At the same time, it conveys that emotions may change by interacting and adding multiple perspectives. As such, emotion networking provides insights into the interactions both between the participants, and between the participants and the heritage item, showing a network of emotions (Dibbits, 2023).

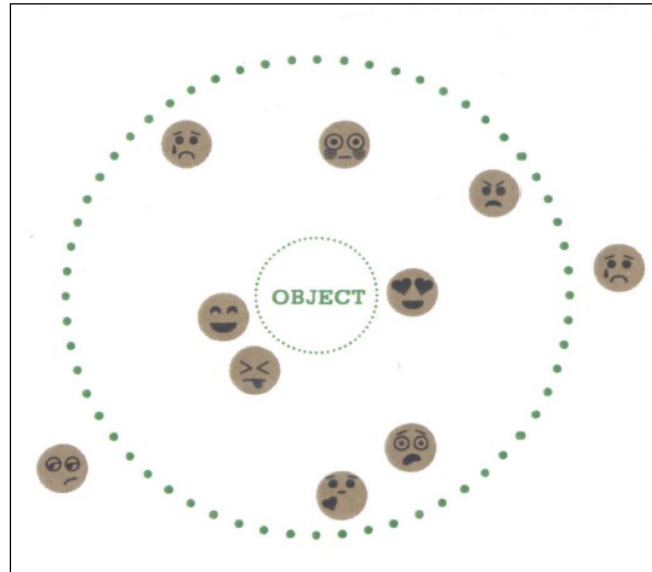
The method of emotion networking can be interpreted as an operationalization of the concept of dynamic heritage, as coined by the late historian Willem Frijhoff (2007). In this respect, heritage is not mere a collection of past vestiges but has a fluid and dynamic meaning as it is defined by people and societies and framed in a cultural and political setting. The meaning of heritage is thus a product of a negotiation process. This concept of dynamic heritage sustains historical thinking skills in an educational setting (Grever & Van Bortel, 2014), like the awareness of historicity, presence, and empathy with various perspectives.

The practice of emotion networking provides people to deal with the complexity that surrounds heritage, and to supply them "with the tools they need to take a meta-perspective when engaging with the past" (Dibbits 2023). The overall goal is – in the words of the developers Dibbits and Willemsen – to become "heritage wise", acquiring "a competence that enables people to critically relate to heritage and discuss it, by paying attention to the social dynamics surrounding heritage and their own and others' position in relationship to it" (Dibbits, 2020; Nordgren, 2016). In the context of our course, also moral and inclusion perspectives are addressed.

Emotion networking can be organized both on paper and in space. When emotion networking on paper, participants position their emotion(s) as a point in a circle along two dimensions of valence and arousal. When emotion networking in space (like in a classroom or in a public space), the participants gather around the object, showing their stronger or weaker emotion by choosing a relative position towards the heritage object. The point of a personal emotional stance can be made visible by stepping forward or backward, or by putting images of emojis in front of them.

In October 2024, a group of 20 international students in our course, visited the Monument of the Grey Buses in Cologne which commemorates the victims and perpetrators of the T4 action organized by the Nazi regime between 1940 and 1941. The grey buses transported victims to places where the disabled victims were systematically murdered (Hamm, 2005). Students were asked to stand around the object to position themselves emotionally. Strong(er) feelings were expressed by choosing a spot more near the monument, whilst weak(er) feelings were expressed by choosing a spot more distanced from the monument (image 1) (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025).

Figure 1: A hypothetical or schematic image of participants' positions, centered around an object. Dibbits (2023).



We then asked the participants, following the protocol of the method, to voluntarily share and explain their position and feelings. One student responded that the experienced emotion was strong, because of the hard concrete the bus is made from, and that this represented in her eyes the harshness of the historical event where it referred to. Another student riposted that indeed the size of the windows of the bus reflected the personal scale of the victims, as was the phrase that is carved in the stone in the midst of the bus: 'Wohin bringt Ihr uns?' [Where are you taking us?]. Another student expressed weak feelings towards the heritage object, not feeling any particular emotion in front of a – in her opinion – log and unwieldy concrete bus. Yet, most of the students felt affected by the senses when looking into the aisle down the middle of the bus, which is actually split in two parts. Striking and causing emotion for some students was that this particular aisle is suitable for wheelchairs, which made the connection of the disabled of past and present heartfelt. The particular geographical position of the monument did raise the eyebrows, questioning the symbolical meaning of the perfect 'see through' from the aisle of the monument on the Cologne Cathedral (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025).

While the participants share their emotional arguments about the question why they have chosen a particular spot around the heritage item, interruption is not allowed, as emotion networking is an exercise in listening to each other. After the exchange of emotions and arguments, the method of emotion networking requires that knowledge is added by means of information about various stakeholders that are involved in the particular heritage. In a classroom setting, this knowledge is usually added by showing information sheets or slides or showing short videos of different people who represent multiple perspectives (Dibbits, 2023).

When emotion networking in space, like at the Monument of the Grey Buses, information about stakeholders can be communicated by telling. In this case the used stakeholders were the disabled victims of the "euthanasia" policy of the Nazi regime, the relatives of the disabled victims of the "euthanasia" policy, the perpetrators like the managers of the psychiatric hospitals and doctors, the Nazi regime as such, the German population as such in wartime and post-war period, and the disabled patients and their relatives nowadays (van der Heide & Wilkening, 2025). After the sharing of knowledge by means of stakeholders to get a multi perspective view, the students can adjust their emotional position if their feelings have been changed. Again, positions and arguments are then exchanged without interruptions from other participants. The 'subtext' question is: has the awareness of multiple perspectives redirected the emotions? Finally, to conclude the method of emotion networking, a short discussion can be instigated about the question "What has this exercise taught you about (this particular) heritage?" (Dibbits, 2023).

Whether the central item in your history class is a monument in public disability history, or any sensitive theme in heritage or citizenship education, both individual norms and emotions and an epistemological framework of multiple perspectives are addressed and are balanced by the structured form of the method of emotion networking.

6 Outcomes and students' reflections

The learning outcomes and experiences after the seminar in Cologne were evaluated using a questionnaire that combined open questions (learner report) with closed questions targeting specific parts of the course (lectures, learning activities, site visits). In total, 30 responses were collected from participating students (2023, p. 18; 2024, p. 12). The answers to the learning reports were analyzed by categorizing and summarizing the quotes. After asking for a general impression and requesting a grade between 1 and 10 ($M = 8.3$), participants were presented with the following questions.

Please finish the sentences: in this course I learned about

- history education that...
- use of heritage that...
- moral issues how...
- inclusive education how...

The summary highlights some common perspectives:

When asked for a general impression, most students mention that they enjoyed and learned a lot from talking about international perspectives and the activating learning activities. Students mentioned the site visits and learning about different school systems. Some students expressed a need for more teacher led instruction and focus on the course content, however students were positive about what they learned from discussing within groups; some examples of students' remarks are:

What most surprised me was how open the people were on the course and the knowledge you could gather by only talking and discussing with people. (Student 14, 2023)

I have really enjoyed the course as I had the opportunity to work with people with other experiences and backgrounds; it made it much easier to work and learn not only with them, but also from them. The program has also been well scheduled with interesting activities that can be used to our work, but for me, the most important part of them would be the reflection we had to do afterwards, so you couldn't just experience it, you had to think about what you saw and share your thoughts with the group. That leads to notice things you didn't before and discuss different topics. (Student 9, 2023)

The exchange of ideas with people from different countries and backgrounds has been an valuable asset in the development of a wider perspective. (Student 1, 2023)

Students reported that they learned that history education in Europe varies greatly from country to country, both in content and in teaching strategies. While there are shared goals — such as developing critical thinking and historical awareness — some approaches are different and the students learned new teaching strategies for their own classrooms. Many students emphasize the importance of multiperspectivity, actively engaging students, and using history as a bridge or a tool for cultural and moral reflection. Students also acknowledge that education is not neutral, and that a critical approach to the past is essential for the development of citizenship. Examples of students remarks about what they learned about history education are:

...it differs from country to country, but the aim of the students (or to-be-teachers) was often similar, but we had different approaches on how to get there. (Student 6, 2024)

...it's different depending on which country you're from, not only to the structure of the education itself but also the content of the subject. For example, in Sweden we learn a lot about global history while it might be considered more important to learn about national history in other countries. (Student 4, 2024)

...everything changes depending on the perspective you are viewing. As a result, it is important to show a variety of them from different but similar teaching styles. Also, how important are the tasks and questions we propose as teachers to orient the learning towards a single vision of history or to a multiperspective one. (Student 8, 2023)

Students wrote that heritage is a powerful educational tool. According to some of them it helps learners to understand their own culture, history, and identity, while fostering critical thinking and perspective-taking. Students think the use of heritage in the classroom can make learning more meaningful and engaging. Heritage is also seen as a bridge to broader social themes such as inclusion, diversity, shared memory, and political awareness. Examples of quotes are:

We can understand the past thanks to it. That questioning about what the objects of the past say is key to knowing past events. Also, thanks to the critical use of the sources, students can also deconstruct historical stereotypes. (Student 8, 2023)

You have to approach it from different perspectives. How did we think about it in the past, how do we think about it now and are there different points of view nowadays? (Student 2, 2023)

Monuments, museums and memorials can be used to integrate normal lessons with some practical activities that can better stimulate students' reflections and questions. (Student 7, 2024)

The emotions heritage produces in us are important and can be used as a point of inflection. (Student 8, 2024)

Students recognize that moral issues help students reflect and view situations from different angles. Open dialogue in a safe classroom environment is essential, as moral topics can be sensitive. Teachers play a key role in guiding discussions while being mindful of their own values. Cultural sensitivity is necessary due to student diversity. Finally, sharing experiences and working in diverse, international groups enhances students' insight into complex moral questions and has strengthened their learning process.

They can be approached by allowing students to share in open discussions, critically analyze sensitive topics and create a respectful and safe environment where students and teachers are allowed to debate without imposing personal opinions. (Student 11, 2024)

In this course you will learn that moral issues in the classroom are key to developing ethical and responsible students. Addressing them fosters respect, empathy and conscious decision-making. Teachers should promote an atmosphere of open dialogue to reflect on values. (Student 5, 2024)

Some of us are more sensitive to certain topics than others. I don't like to say it but we MUST plan to include anti-racism work in the curricula at universities everywhere, otherwise we as teachers are not able to navigate the classroom and also protect possible victims of racism properly. (Student 10, 2023)

Students learned that inclusive education demands continuous effort from teachers. Students mentioned that accessibility — both physical and pedagogical — is vital for inclusion. Students also noted that true inclusion reaches beyond the classroom, addressing broader societal inequalities.

I learned about inclusive education how you could implement a system of individual learning in a group of students with and without special needs. (Student 6, 2023)

... it's possible to make education accessible for everyone, even though it might be difficult at times. We talked about this when discussing the accessibility to history for everyone and how such a small change as putting a ramp in a museum makes education more inclusive for someone in a wheelchair or with a physical disability that makes it difficult for them to walk. The inclusivity does however also mean that the education itself should be inclusive, for example making the topic in question easier to understand by explaining it in a simpler way (Student 8, 2024)

Summarizing, students reported a large variety of learning experiences and outcomes, stressing the impact of international exchange around history education, the use of heritage, moral issues and inclusive education. The most common reflections were about the fact that students

learned a lot from the international exchange. It was also surprising to see that they learned a lot from each other and did not need much input from the course leaders to keep on discussing and questioning their ideas.

7 Discussion

The ambitions and the aims to develop a joint course with the purpose to facilitate encounters between history teacher students from different European countries and to increase students' knowledge about teaching challenges and each other's school systems have been successful. The collaboration between students with different experiences has been even more fruitful than we had expected. Students have co-worked in a respectful way and with open minds tried to challenge their own knowledge and their own experiences. It seems as if the theoretical history didactics perspectives framing the course have opened the eyes of the students. They reflect on the need of studying moral perspectives in relation to history and the need to be aware of inclusion, emotions and content knowledge as natural ways to make participation, learning and citizenship possible for everyone. Working with heritage was perceived as a powerful tool to learn and reflect on culture, identity and history. Even if teacher education is still different in different countries because of the school systems, there are important possibilities and advantages with international collaboration with concrete subject studies as the main content.

To problematize our findings and results, teachers' and student teachers' ideas are not always easy to transform and apply in practical teaching. One obstacle is that moral perspectives might be problematic for history teachers as well as for historians. Traditionally the ideal at universities and in schools was not to interfere the supposedly "objective" view of history with moral reflections. However, it appears obvious that it has never been possible to isolate historical studies from expressions of moral values and what has been regarded as right or wrong and good or bad. The students seem to argue that moral aspects do not mean to moralize, but to reflect and make interpretations. Moral perspectives are too important to be excluded in history teaching and learning.

With regard to an inclusive approach, it can be cautiously stated that students generally addressed the need to take into account social diversity. In terms of political attitudes towards the value of history education as a shared heritage in Europe, the gap between nationally oriented history teacher training and a European challenge may be reinforced. This is, of course, not unproblematic or easy, as teacher education, for all its transregional aspirations, continues to be negotiated and shaped at the national level.

Our experiences and data described in this miniature are still of an explorative nature. Further research could delve into questions on how internationalization and intercultural learning in history teacher education can contribute to teachers' beliefs about multicultural and inclusive education in history education. Learning and experiencing how dialogues with multiperspectivity in time, stakeholders and nationality can create transformative experiences for teachers (Clarke, 2005). However, what is needed to make these experiences more sustainable in order to prepare teaching history in challenging and uncertain times?

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Review

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Ethical statement

Ethical approval was not sought for the present study because the answers are anonymous and no personal data was collected. The informants are adults.

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